Review article

The anatomy of frivolity (On taking nonsense seriously)*

JOHN H. McDOWELL

Thomas Kuhn (1962) portrays scientific enterprise as periodically evolving toward the discovery of the invisible, as the paradigms of normal science are modified to accommodate anomalous empirical observations. The history of folklore studies exhibits an interesting variation on this theme, the periodic enfranchisement of topics previously considered too trivial to merit serious scholarly attention. Folkloristic treatises are laden with gratuitous apologies and other gestures of hesitancy, reflecting the folklorist's anticipation of resistance to what is likely to be perceived as an excursion into the trivial. This rite of deprecation has been played out in a number of arenas, over a period of two centuries of folkloristic inquiry. At the dawn of systematic folkloristics, Bishop Thomas Percy in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) characterizes his materials as 'rude survivals of the past, deserving of a certain amount of attention as illustrating the language, the numbers, the beliefs and customs of bygone days, although as poetry they had no intrinsic value' (quoted in Bluestein 1962). A modern echo of this same attitude can be found in Roger Abrahams's *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Lore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (1964). Discussing sound patterning in one of the couplets in his collection, Abrahams throws in the caveat that 'this is not great poetry', but it is nonetheless worthy of some attention (1964: 105).

Folklorists over the centuries have apologized for their interest in oral poetry rather than the canonized literary genres, for dealing with folk art rather than fine art, for pursuing the artistic expression of marginalized classes and peoples rather than mainstream productions, and for attending to children's lore in addition to that of adults. Nonetheless, folklorists have often been the champions of these neglected traditions. Caught in this paradox, the folklorist down through the centuries presents an

* Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

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essentially ambivalent persona, so often constrained by the reigning decorum among academicians to apologize for materials obviously engaging his or her imaginative passion.

A major facet of the folkloristic mission has been this legitimization of the trivial. Those kinds of behavior that a society classifies as trivial, and thereby excludes from serious consideration, frequently enclose vital perspectives on the ethos of that society. To the extent that folkloristics has enabled us to transcend what Brian Sutton-Smith (1970) calls (in reference to children's folklore) the 'triviality barrier', it has performed an important role in acquainting us with ourselves. Recent developments in the study of the ludic element in cultures, in which folklorists are playing a significant role, can be taken as an illustration of this process. The serious study of play, still in its infancy, promises to unravel at least some of the mysteries surrounding the human temperament.

Susan Stewart, in her *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, offers a valuable contribution to this discussion. Stewart provides no apologies for her topic, which may indicate that the serious study of frivolity has attained academic legitimacy. In the pages that follow, I want to briefly outline some of Stewart's extremely useful propositions, and then suggest a few disiderata for a comprehensive treatment of frivolity in culture.

Stewart's theoretical apparatus rests on the concept of *intertextuality*, the notion that one universe of discourse may make reference to another universe of discourse. The thrust of her theorizing may be conveyed through a consideration of five assumptions set forth in the preface (p. viii):

(1) 'That common sense is an on-going accomplishment of social life'
(2) 'That common sense is a set of interpretive procedures used in creating everyday life situations'

We encounter in these propositions another version of that inferential baseline haunting contemporary studies of expressive behavior. All transformational models must provide a starting point, an initial construct upon which the transformations to be specified may operate. In this instance, we find ourselves in Alfred Schutz's everyday lifeworld, where people negotiate a common understanding of the 'horizons' of situations through a collaborative segregation of text (the relevant elements) from context (the less relevant elements). These procedures are traditional, that is, they have evolved through former experiences in the everyday lifeworld.

As critical as constructs of this kind are to transformational models,

they nonetheless raise some rather distressing issue
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they nonetheless raise some rather distressing issues. Common sense, as defined here, remains a purely speculative construct, not readily identified in the actual flow of experience. Its boundaries are particularly difficult to resolve, much as the boundary between ordinary speech and artistic speech resists precise delimitation. Finally, there is a tendency to view the baseline construct, be it common sense or ordinary speech, as somehow primary, and that which differs from it as secondary or derivative. This presumption of primacy, an artifact of analytical method, may do violence to the actual disposition of the phenomena we are considering.

(3) 'That fictions and play are texts standing in a paradoxical and dependent relationship to texts manufactured by using common sense'

Just as verbal art is defined in opposition to ordinary speech, the domain of frivolity is defined here in opposition to the realm of common sense. Fictive and playful expressions are intertextual in that they presuppose common sense as a point of departure. We witness here the realization of one of the problems mentioned above, in that the fictive and the playful are seen as dependent on the baseline construct, common sense. Could it not be just the other way around? How could we even establish a procedure for determining the priority of either common sense or nonsense?

I have two additional qualms about this proposition. Stewart tells us that she introduces the word 'text', standing for a variety of nonscriptural behaviors, in order to emphasize 'the interpreted, the emergent, the processive nature of our experience in making meaning' (p. 48). But to anyone who has dabbled in philology, the term seems particularly ill-suited to this task, instead bringing to mind intimations of the perfect, final, and inviolable manifestation of some prior act of creativity. In addition, these fictive texts are said to be paradoxical with respect to common sense, but Stewart never clearly defines the word 'paradox' that, along with its derivative forms, bears such a major burden in her presentation.

(4) 'That the varieties of play and fictions are arranged through common sense reasoning in relationships of decreasing reality to the texts of common sense'

(5) 'That the outer limits of this arrangement are characterized by nonsense and its concomitant categories of fate, chance and accident'

Now we are in a position to appreciate the grand design of Stewart's theory. Taking common sense and the everyday lifeworld as our point of departure, we move through the entire universe of human expressive

behavior to arrive at last at its outer limits, identified here as nonsense, fate, chance, and accident. The journey begins with realism, which remains loyal to the interpretive procedures of the everyday lifeworld, but incorporates them into a nonfactual universe. Myth and science fiction retain the spirit of realism, but within a somewhat counterfactual universe. With irony, metafiction, and the ludic genres of folklore, we move into a mischievous realm of fancy where the text turns in upon itself, and the rules of interpretation become increasingly discourse-specific. Finally, we arrive at the realm of nonsense, which is about nothing, or about itself. Nonsense, by this reckoning, is a residual category invoked when all routine attempts at decoding a text prove futile.

Stewart complements this impressive theoretical stance with a discussion of several techniques commonly used to create nonsense. Illustrations are drawn from her own fieldwork on a Baltimore schoolyard, and from published folkloric and literary sources. Most of the folkloric material proceeds from the rambunctious expressive world of the child, and one of the shortcomings of this study is that Stewart never attempts to account for the delight that children take in nonsense. Literary sources range broadly from Rabelais, Swift, and Stern to contemporaries like Beckett, Borges, and Robbe-Grillet. This eclecticism poses Stewart's study as a searching critique of Western civilization, but at the same time deprives it of a finite ethnographic context.

Several varieties of nonsense are treated in this study, as the following summary will suggest:

> The texts of nonsense are produced by appropriating the vertical or horizontal (or any other) organization of categories common to common sense and traversing that organization through procedures such as reversing or inverting them, shifting their boundaries, repeating them to infinity and/or exhaustion, conjoining them in time, or fracturing them into their members and recombining them according to some 'contra-sensible' principle. (p. 199)

This statement represents Stewart's closest approximation to a typology of nonsense, clearly leaving room for the development of a more systematic approach to these materials. Stewart's inventory of nonsense includes the following entries:

(1) reversals and inversions (anomaly, ambiguity, ambivalence, proper nots, taking things back, inverting classes, reversible texts, discourse that denies itself, metaphor): Particularly fresh was her category of 'discourse that denies itself', illustrated by the familiar child's rhyme beginning

> Ladies and Jellyspoons
> I come before you
> To stand behind you

and ending with the koan-like couplet

> The next meeting will be held
> At the four corners of the round table. (p

(2) play with boundaries (misdirection, surplus ficiencies of signification, manifesting the in boundaries, including physical, verbal, and under this rubric.

(3) play with infinity (repetition, nesting, circula causality): Forms are treated here that 'thr threaten to involve the participants in an e following children's rhyme:

> I know a man named Michael Finnegan
> He wears whiskers on his chinnegan.
> Along came a wind and blew them in aga
> Poor old Michael Finnegan, begin again.

(4) the uses of simultaneity (multiple worlds, tl parity, the terrible pun, the portmanteau, the on Husserl's laws regarding 'lived experien argues that some nonsense forms contradi notions of atomistic and linear time, as in the the pun.

(5) arrangement and rearrangement within a clos of this category, I will reproduce Stewart's tre drawn from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1961):

the 'Ithaca' section of *Ulysses* asks 'What anagrams had name in youth,' answering:

> Leopold Bloom
> Ellpod bomool
> Moll dope loob
> Bollopedoom
> Old Ollebo, M.A.

The permutations reveal elements of the plot destined i Molly's adultery and his own vulnerability. (p. 177)

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The next meeting will be held
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(2) play with boundaries (misdirection, surpluses of signification, deficiencies of signification, manifesting the implicit): All manner of boundaries, including physical, verbal, and conceptual, are treated under this rubric.

(3) play with infinity (repetition, nesting, circularity, serializing, infinite causality): Forms are treated here that 'threaten infinity', that is, threaten to involve the participants in an endless cycle, as in the following children's rhyme:

I know a man named Michael Finnegan
He wears whiskers on his chinnegan.
Along came a wind and blew them in again;
Poor old Michael Finnegan, begin again. (p. 131)

(4) the uses of simultaneity (multiple worlds, the convergence of disparity, the terrible pun, the portmanteau, the macaronic): Drawing on Husserl's laws regarding 'lived experiences of time', Stewart argues that some nonsense forms contradict our common-sense notions of atomistic and linear time, as in the 'aural simultaneity' of the pun.

(5) arrangement and rearrangement within a closed field: As an example of this category, I will reproduce Stewart's treatment of one instance drawn from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1961):

the 'Ithaca' section of *Ulysses* asks 'What anagrams had he (Bloom) made on his name in youth,' answering:

Leopold Bloom
Ellpod bomool
Moll dope loob
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The permutations reveal elements of the plot destined in Bloom's own name — Molly's adultery and his own vulnerability. (p. 177)

Stewart's study presents a useful point of departure toward the goal of

formulating a comprehensive theory of nonsense. Her excellent ear for nonsense, harnessed to an ambitious theoretical design, results in a statement of sufficient range and scope to suggest the possibility of gaining a secure hold on the problem of frivolity among human beings. The program I would propose for building upon Stewart's foundation in this area could be designated the *ethnography and ethnology of speaking nonsense*. Its procedures are essentially sociolinguistic and semiotic, in that it attempts to correlate formal patterns and observable uses. It expands on Stewart's program in three directions that I will present below in the form of propositions.

First, a theory of nonsense must be grounded in close observation of finite ethnographic contexts. Much of Stewart's apparatus, even pivotal concerns like 'making common sense' and 'making nonsense', remains merely plausible in the absence of micro-level studies examining the social deployment of nonsense within finite communicative networks. Moreover, it appears that communities differ widely with respect to their tolerance for nonsense, to the types of nonsense they produce, and to the uses they make of nonsense. Empirical research conducted in finite social settings should result in a description of the range of possible manifestations, and the identification of any universal elements present throughout the corpus of socially-situated nonsense discourse.

Second, a theory of nonsense must contain a systematic account of the formal properties of nonsense. Stewart's discursive treatment of several varieties of nonsense provides a preliminary scheme, but future investigation of these materials should move toward a rigorous analysis identifying basic constituent units and their range of allowable permutations. The semiotic concept of the sign, with its two faces, the signifier and the signified, could be used to specify the locus of ludic transformations removing a nonsensical text from the realm of ordinary discourse. Some of these transformations affect primarily the signifier, for example, by exploiting the homophonic properties of language, while others such as perceptual anomaly exploit irregularities in classificatory systems (McDowell 1979).

Finally, a theory of nonsense must provide a functional profile of nonsensical discourse. Stewart offers some preliminary insights along these lines, but her study is primarily oriented to the formal properties of nonsense. The ethnographic description of socially-situated nonsensical discourse would enable us to address functional issues like these: What strategic purposes does nonsense fulfill in group interactions? Do some members of a community have greater access to nonsense than others? Under what conditions is nonsense an acceptable mode of social intercourse? What is the local etiquette regarding the recognition of nonsense?

Stewart's valuable study broaches the possibility account of nonsense as a form of discourse. Building findings, we might envision an ethnography and eth nonsense, informed by three central propositions: (nonsense must be grounded in the close observation o contexts, (2) that a theory of nonsense must contain a of the formal properties of nonsense, and (3) that a must provide a functional profile of nonsensical unabashed treatment of nonsense indicates that friv achieved academic legitimacy. Further investigatio promises to enrich our understanding of the expressi individual and the communicative resources of comm

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Stewart's valuable study broaches the possibility of a comprehensive account of nonsense as a form of discourse. Building on her preliminary findings, we might envision an ethnography and ethnology of speaking nonsense, informed by three central propositions: (1) that a theory of nonsense must be grounded in the close observation of finite ethnographic contexts, (2) that a theory of nonsense must contain a systematic account of the formal properties of nonsense, and (3) that a theory of nonsense must provide a functional profile of nonsensical discourse. Stewart's unabashed treatment of nonsense indicates that frivolous discourse has achieved academic legitimacy. Further investigation of its modalities promises to enrich our understanding of the expressive tendencies of the individual and the communicative resources of communities.

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